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# **Luxury Fashion Brands: Factors Influencing Young Female Consumers'**

## **Luxury Fashion Purchasing In Taiwan**

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## **Abstract**

*Purpose (mandatory)* Against the background of increasing consumption of luxury fashion brands by young female consumers in Asian countries, this paper offers insights into the consumption motives and purchasing behaviour of that market segment in Taiwan.

*Design/methodology/approach (mandatory)* Analysis of data collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews with twenty-three 18-32 year-old fashion-conscious females was completed and new empirical insights are offered.

*Findings (mandatory)* The study found a high level of involvement in the world of luxury fashion retailing. Asian consumers devoured media commentary, drew inspiration from female celebrities, and treated information-seeking and discussion of luxury fashion brands with friends as a serious and enjoyable pursuit. The social status conferred by expensive

fashion wear motivated them to spend on luxury brands even if their discretionary income was limited. Potential guilt in so doing was assuaged by rationalising that the quality was good and the purchase would be long lasting. Marketers targeting this valuable segment should communicate appeals to an aspirational lifestyle in traditional and social media, effective at reaching young women.

*Originality/value (mandatory)* The study reported in this article contributes to the limited published research into the luxury marketing sector in Asia by examining the buying behaviour of female *Strawberry Generation* consumers in Taiwan. It is the first to research and investigate the meanings attached to luxury by these individuals in the collectivist culture of Taiwan, as well as their motivations, and the factors influencing their purchase of luxury fashions. The study thus contributes with new knowledge to the buying of luxury fashion products by young female Taiwanese consumers, which may be extended to other collectivist cultures in Asia.

**Keywords:** Luxury brands; luxury purchasing motives, luxury purchase environment, luxury buying behaviour; fashion; consumer behaviour; Asian market; young female consumers, Strawberry Generation.

## Introduction

Over a decade ago, it was suggested that the marketing of luxury brands was one of the fastest growing sectors of marketing in general (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). A decade later, seven of the top 100 global brands were luxury products: Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany, Cartier, Gucci, Armani and Burberry (Friedman, 2010). Several research institutions routinely report on the considerable value of the luxury goods market. Verdict Research predicted for instance that, by 2012, it would be worth £225 billion (roughly \$361 bn or €279 bn) globally by 2012 (Clark, 2011), while Bain and Company (2010) reported that demand for such luxury accessories as handbags and shoes in particular was increasing year after year in China.

Future marketing opportunities are presented by the robust and accelerating demand for luxury goods in the Asia Pacific region despite the recessions that have struck in the area over recent times (Socha, 2008). The region as a whole is claimed to account for half of all global luxury purchases. It is predicted that the market in Greater China (including Taiwan) alone will account for almost half by 2020 and will be worth €169 billion (about \$219 bn): a considerable increase from its 15% share in 2010 (Bowman, 2008; Sheng, 2011). A number of luxury brands have been marketed in Asia for several decades (Ram, 1989) and others have more recently recognised the rising middle class there as a lucrative target market.

The Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) brand could be termed the trailblazer of this trend in the Asian market, where it was one of the most desired luxury brands in China in 2010 (Bain, 2010). The company began its Asian campaign in 1992, with a first store in China, and has more recently entered the markets of Inner Mongolia, Vietnam and Cambodia (Adams and Elliott, 2010). A commercial survey measured a 35% increase in the market penetration of such luxury brands in the Greater China area (Bernstein Global Wealth

Management, 2009). Chanel has also been proactive in the region, cementing its presence in Taiwan by establishing a local branch office in 1990 and allowing it to focus its market development effort in the cities of Taipei, Kaohsiung and Taichung (CCIFT, 2011). The luxury goods market in Taiwan was worth €2.7 billion or about \$3.5 billion in 2008 (Smith, 2009) and further potential resulted from the lifting of travel restrictions between China and Taiwan in that year. In 2010, Mainland China had overtaken Japan as the main origin of tourist visitors following a 68% rise in numbers to 1.6 million (China Travel News, 2012).

Scholars have suggested that Asia has a higher proportion of aspirational consumers than any other parts of the world, resulting in an increasing demand for luxury goods (Curtin, 2009; Degen, 2009; Smith, 2009). Thorniley (2010) agrees that luxury brands in Taiwan and other Asian countries have succeeded by satisfying a consumer need for upward mobility and status, rooted in Confucianism. Ram (1994, p. 52) sums up this appeal by asserting that, “a bottle of cognac affirms self-worth...by definition if you can afford the drink, you have arrived”. This model can be applied equally to such luxury fashion branded goods as fashion accessories. Zhaohui (2006, p. 1) describes the typical Asian consumer is “better educated, more sophisticated, better travelled, more adventurous and more discerning than ever before” and the stress resulting inevitably from their long working hours engenders a desire to indulge themselves. It is not only the nouveau riche who purchases luxury goods, however. Chadha, quoted in Serwer (2008, p. 200) asserts that, “it’s not uncommon for secretaries or junior executives to spend their entire month’s salary on one piece of luxury”. In this paper, the reported study findings confirm that many young women in a dull routine job aspire to purchase a dream luxury accessory, which will demand saving for several months. These mostly young female luxury purchasers have been labelled ‘Madame Bovary’, after the main character in Flaubert’s celebrated novel, who sought to escape the drudgeries of her daily life

(Yang, 2011). Previous studies by, for example, Phau and Prendergast (2000) have acknowledged this 'dream value' component of luxury goods. Gucci's CEO is reported as having said that his company "sells dreams and not handbags" (Bowman, 2008).

Although the important younger age group may not purchase many items, they have "richer luxury knowledge" (Song and Zhu, 2007) and are therefore a market segment with significant potential value for fashion houses (Hung, 2006). Yet, little is known about their purchasing behaviour. It has been suggested that they may perceive luxury purchasing in a different way from other groups or cultural perspectives, being labelled 'the Strawberry Generation' because they are seen as being easily bruised by life experiences. Consumers of the Strawberry Generation were born between 1981 and 1991, after the politically charged Kaohsiung Incident, a turning point in the history of Taiwan, at which dissident pressure against martial law eventually led to a lifting of the bans on independent political parties and media (Chao, 2009). Growing up during Taiwan's economic boom era, they have little knowledge of the hardship and physical labour to which their parents were accustomed and are seen by employers as poor workers, who are so soft that they burst when under pressure like a strawberry (Cole, 2008; Liu, 2010). Much of their lack of perseverance and inability to handle stress is a direct result of overprotection by their parents (Buchan, 2008). The fact that this generation has known only democracy has been suggested to result in a lack of political consciousness (Keating, 2010; Yu, 2005). The national media have perpetuated the inadequacies of the Strawberry Generation and their fragility has even been satirised by a Taiwanese designer whose sandals balance on strawberry shaped heels (Shu, 2010). Meanwhile, Lin (2004) has found that it is characteristic of their shopping behaviour to pay with credit cards and pay off only the interest. That buy-now-pay-later attitude has resulted in these young consumers having the highest credit card debt of any age group in Taiwan.

To the best of our knowledge, the present study is first to examine this interesting segment in-depth – the Strawberry Generation. This study is intended to link them to luxury branded products and investigates the perception of Strawberry generation consumers of luxury purchases. These young people have a greater disposable income than previous generations (Tomkins, 1999), and as a result of having improved disposable income support, they have adopted new fashion, culture and influences from different social environments, family members, peers/friends and the public presses. Understanding these adolescents' behaviour has become an interesting subject for marketers and scholars, and several studies have found that these consumers commonly have a higher level of sensitivity towards and involvement in high-end fashion goods such as fashion apparel (Beaudoin et al., 1998). In addition, the generation theorists suggest that as the macro-environment changes, there are concomitant and distinctive changes in patterns of consumer behaviour (Strauss and Howe, 1999). As consumer mind-sets, behaviour and assistances are developed via socialisation agents such as family, peers and the communication channels (Moschis, 1987), the creation of media choices including television, the internet and journals has results in greater diversity of product and lifestyle choices for different generations and marketing to this group involves a different approach (Phelps, 1999).

Results of this study have shown possible contributions into the luxury-marketing sector in Asia Pacific by examining the buying behaviour of Strawberry Generation in Taiwan, especially among female consumers. As literature taking account of Chinese oriented societies and region relies heavily on Chinese consumers alone, more research is needed to underline the differences that define each region. This study fills this gap by investigating motivation and purchasing behaviours of Taiwanese consumers regarding luxury brand purchases. The study investigated the meanings attached to luxury by these individuals in the collectivist culture of Taiwan, as well as their motivations and the factors



influencing their purchase of luxury fashions. Three key contributions are as stated: (a) the buying behaviour of young female consumers; (b) the effect of collectivist culture in luxury purchases; (c) the luxury effects of Strawberry Generation with luxury consumption in Taiwan. This study makes theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge and is balanced by the managerial insights offered into the most effective strategies for reaching and communicating with this potentially lucrative market segment.

The paper is structured as follows: After reviewing the literature of luxury purchasing motives, the luxury purchase environment and the influences on luxury buying behaviour, the article describes the research methodology before presenting and discussing the findings of the study. It closes with conclusions, including the limitations of the study, its managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

## **Literature review**

### ***Luxury-purchasing motivations***

A number of studies in luxury consumption have been published as both affluent Western societies and emerging markets acquire and conspicuously display luxuries as part of their lifestyles (Bian and Fotsythe, 2010; Ko and Megehee, 2010). The new consumer segmentation of the current luxury market differs significantly to the past measures of these characteristics. For instance, the new consumer segmentation now includes younger, affluent and people who, in declaring their stake in the high life, are inclined to be spendthrifts (Silverstein and Fiske, 2005). Enthusiasm for luxury brands is growing in emerging economies of China, India, Far East, the Middle East, and Latin America (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Verdict Research, 2007). Hence, most were undertaken in the West. Several authors have commented on the absence of research findings relevant to consumption of

luxury products in Eastern countries and called for further studies to compare consumers' motivations in the two contexts (Dubois, Czellar & Laurent, 2005; Truong, 2010; Wong & Hogg, 2008). Results have shown that the luxury goods market is gradually shifting its focus from Western to Asia Pacific countries (Bain & Co, 2012a, Duma *et al.*, 2015). More importantly, Asian consumers have been identified to differ from their counterparts in the West, as Asian consumers are more materialistic (Li and Zhang, 2011; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998), which may partially explain the increasing demand for luxury purchases in their countries. As Echikson (1995, p. 112) has put it: "self-indulgence never went out of fashion – it went to Asia". In the present study, we aim to contribute with empirical data from Taiwan to further broaden our understanding of this phenomenon.

It is generally accepted that Asia is a collectivist culture, whereas the West is individualistic (Nguyen *et al.*, 2014). According to Escalas and Bettman (2005) westerners tend to focus on the personal self, thinking of themselves in terms of unique personal traits and attributes and de-emphasizing others, while Easterners tend to focus on the social self and how the self is related to other people. This suggests that luxury purchasing in Taiwan will be motivated both by how prospective purchasers think others will see them and what they think others will expect them to do. The former motivation implies that a luxury purchase functions as a means of enhancing social identity (Ahuvia, 2005). The latter can be construed as the consequence of susceptibility to personal influence, the objective of the purchase being to meet the expectations of people regarded as important.

A recent cross-cultural study concluded that brand managers, seeking to target consumers in a collectivist culture, need to develop a brand message around occasions and ostentatious behaviour (Shukla, 2010). In addition, it has been suggested that emerging markets such as China might respond to marketing promotions based exclusively on conspicuous-consumption values (Truong, 2010). Echikson (1995, p. 115) noted more than a

decade ago that BMW, for example, would be well aware of this motivation among affluent consumers in that their cars “can’t be big enough” for the Asian market. Social status can be achieved by the acquisition and consumption of brands that are conspicuously luxurious and recognised as such by the prospective purchasers’ peers (Han *et al.*, 2010). However, it has been argued that *niche* luxury brands risk being regarded as a waste of money by Asian consumers because they won’t be recognised (Bowman, 2008). An Interbrand report identifies status seeking as the major motivator for luxury purchasing in Asia (Blume and Chajet, 2009) and, since gift giving is a major feature of Asian culture, it comes as no surprise that another commercial survey found that 70% of Taiwanese chose to give a luxury brands that could elevate their own status in the eyes of the recipient (Synovate, 2009).

An earlier study by Dubois and Czellar (2002) investigated consumers’ perceptions of the term ‘luxury’ and noted that it concerns self-indulgence. Though they do not specify exactly where their interviews were conducted, it is clear from one of their recommendations for future studies that it was not in Asia. The finding could therefore have added significance in the Eastern culture of Taiwan, where the social self is of great importance. It is also worth reflecting that the target market for luxury goods in the West has traditionally been older, with more established consumers, whereas there now exists a sizeable market segment of young female consumers of luxury products in Asian countries such as Taiwan, which is an important target for luxury-brand owners.

### ***Purchase environment***

Kapferer and Bastien (2009) suggest that exclusivity is key to the management of luxury brands and recommend that the brand owners therefore develop expertise in customer relationship management. The initial reluctance of many to invest in formalised customer service has been noted by Nueno and Quelch (1998), but more recent surveys of luxury brand

managers have found that direct communication with the customer on a personal level is an area of growing importance (Fionda and Moore, 2009). The development of such a customer relationship demands that retail management acknowledges visitors to their stores as valuable customers to whom a memorable store experience should be delivered (Cavender and Rein, 2009).

Luxury brand managers should focus their efforts on what may also be called experiential marketing by taking the essence of a product and amplifying it into a set of tangible, physical and interactive experiences that reinforce the offer (Atwal and Williams, 2009). A survey by Bain and Company (2010) has found, however, that not all luxury brands are delivering a total product and service experience and that a gap remains between customer expectations of service encounters and the reality, especially in the Asian region. Cavender and Rein (2009) reported that many customers described salespeople in luxury retailing as unhelpful, intimidating and rude (Cavender and Rein, 2009).

Though an online survey of consumers in Europe, Asia and North America conducted by Seringhaus (2005) found that the Internet had not yet been fully exploited as a selling channel for luxury goods, many young consumers have since deserted upmarket shopping streets and department stores in favour of online purchasing. In Taiwan, for example, the main online vendors are Yahoo and PCHome, both of which guarantee the authenticity of the products and offer a seven-day return window. Collaborations with several banks allow them to make interest-free payment available for such major luxury brands such as, for example, Louis Vuitton, YSL, Balenciaga or Christian Dior. The competing department stores also offer interest-free terms at various times of the year, but with more rigorous eligibility criteria than either of the online merchants. Added to the wide availability of credit cards (Hung, 2006), this variety of channels and payment options has brought luxury purchasing within the reach of more Taiwanese consumers. A possible longer-term consequence is, however, that

these retailing strategies will damage the image and diminish the brand equity of a luxury brand, heretofore based on exclusivity. And as a consequence, thereby reduce its brand equity. As Kapferer and Bastien, 2009, p. 311) put it: “the greater the inaccessibility ... the greater the desire”.

The ‘rarity principle’ in luxury retailing states that luxury products are perceived as rare products; when overdiffused, they gradually lose their luxury character (Dubois and Paternault). It has been suggested that, while this may be the situation in a Western context, consumers in the Asian culture of Singapore dream of owning highly popular luxury brands and that there is therefore little evidence that the rarity principle holds in general (Phau and Prendergast, 2000). The overall conclusion of Phau and Prendergast’s (2000, pp. 133-134) study is that “Asian individuals within any community feel a need to secure and improve their status in society. Thus a luxury brand is seen as the dominant determinant of social position and prestige ... The conformity to the collective acceptance of the community restricts the culture of self-expression”. A study in Hong Kong a year earlier confirms the contention that there are significant differences between Western and Eastern consumers, in reporting that purchase does not have the adverse effect, which appeared in the U.S., on the desire to own luxury brands (Wong and Zaichkowsky, 1999).

### ***Reference groups***

The Internet has become an important vehicle for generating or reinforcing a sense of community among a brand’s customers by giving them the sense that they are all like-minded people who are driven by a similar passion (Cova and Pace, 2006). A strategy focused on the creation and maintenance of brand communities is an intuitive logical initiative for luxury products, in that history and tradition afford a ready rationale for the sense of belongingness. Well-managed communication can furthermore offer members a critical demarcation

between users of their brand and users of other brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), and thereby engender brand loyalty.

Goldie (2008) reports that Cartier was the first luxury brand owner to implement a brand community strategy, by setting up a music-focused community on MySpace to as a means to promote customer interaction with the brand worldwide. In 2009, Burberry followed suit by launching a social networking site, 'Art of the Trench', to encourage a sense of community among its followers. More than seven million visits in about nine months up to mid-2010 generated valuable marketing research data and opportunities for further promotion of the brand.

The influence of reference groups on the purchase of luxury goods has been recognised in the academic literature (Amaldoss & Jain, 2010; Chao & Schor, 1998; Chen, Yeh & Wang, 2008; Li and Su, 2007). It has been suggested that identification with reference groups has been responsible for the 'buying frenzies' generated when limited editions come on the market (Amaldoss and Jain, 2008). The symbolic nature of luxury goods means that consumers are under heavy influence to purchase the 'right' brand to fit into their reference group or groups (Schau and Russell, 2005). A study by O'Cass and McEwan (2004) concluded that younger consumers were particularly prone to this kind of influence, in that consumption of certain products and brands was found to have been used for the portrayal of a self-image and to permit entry into certain groups. It is generally agreed that the social group is extremely important in Asian cultures, leading to conformity with the individuals who are perceived to matter. As Wong and Ahuvia (1998, p. 43) put it: "if the in group prescribes expensive and ostentatious possessions or activities as socially appropriate, then a good member must subscribe to such public display of wealth in order to fit in".

Lastly, the influence of reference groups in the purchasing luxury goods may also be explained by the perception that they are an investment, a key driver of the consumer's

decision (Friedman, 2010). It has been shown that investment choices are consistently influenced by the information and opinion of others (Hoffmann and Broekhuizen, 2009).

The young segment of the Asian market, whether part of the ‘Madame Bovary’ subset of the ‘Strawberry Generation’, who escape the drudgery of daily life with limited spending power, or more affluent subsets who are likewise easily bruised by life experiences, are a significant target for marketers of luxury goods. According to a recent McKinsey report, 18 to 34-year-olds constitute nearly half of all luxury-brand purchasers in Asia (Jin, 2011). Table 1 highlights key definitions and studies. Despite the importance of knowledge about this valuable market, very few studies have investigated young female consumers’ consumption and purchasing behaviours in the luxury context. The objective of this study was to gain insight into the meanings that young female Taiwanese consumers attach to luxury, their purchasing motives and the factors that influence their fashion-shopping choices. This is explained next.

*< Insert Table 1 About Here >*

## **Methodology**

In order to achieve the research objectives just summarised, a qualitative and interpretive approach was taken, in which the data collection vehicle was semi-structured personal interviews with luxury purchasers belonging to the ‘Strawberry Generation’ of 18-32 year-olds in Taiwan, described and defined in the Introduction. This cohort represents the future of the luxury brands in Asia because, though its members may not purchase in large volume, they have the “richer luxury knowledge” noted by Song and Zhu (2007). Specifically, young female consumers were chosen for this study because they are a

disproportionately valuable target segment for fashion houses (Hung, 2006) and yet the literature review has shown that little is known about their purchasing behaviour.

### ***Data collection procedures***

To recruit the sample, a posting in a Taiwanese online forum (e.g., Facebook event page and bloggers of fashion or luxury brands) invited young women with experience of purchasing luxury fashion products to participate in the study. The study initially recruited 51 potential candidates, which underwent a screening process. After providing details of this study, the result was that 23 face-to-face interviews were conducted with respondents who had bought at least one luxury product in the previous year and happy to be tape-recorded during the interview. Given the relatively small number, face-to-face interviewing was preferred to focus groups for this study, to reduce the risk of a competitive atmosphere within groups encouraging participants to exaggerate their luxury purchasing behaviour and thereby diminish the validity of the results.

To minimise communication difficulties, the respondents were interviewed in Mandarin. The interviews were conducted in the informal environment of coffee shops by a female researcher of a similar age, in order to reduce formality and thereby facilitate discussion. All interviews covered a pre-determined agenda and standard questions as a means of achieving the maximum feasible level of validity across the data gathered (Wilson, 2006). Respondents were first asked what they considered to be a 'luxury fashion' brand and why they categorised it as a 'luxury'. They were next asked to name luxury items they had purchased and explain what had motivated those purchases. Finally, the interviewer asked them to reflect on their most recent luxury fashion purchase and say who or what had influenced their decision to buy it. This being an exploratory study, they were also given the



opportunity to discuss in a more open-ended way other factors that might have had an impact on their purchase behaviour. The aim was to gain added insights into the meanings attached to the luxury fashion item they had bought.

All interviews were tape-recorded with the respondents' permission. Subsequent transcriptions were analysed by a group of three researchers, who followed the methodological principles of thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994), focusing on themes and patterns of behaviour.

Table 2 presents the sample profile, showing that respondents were mostly educated to tertiary level. Six were students, and the remainder mainly in professional occupations.

*< Insert Table 2 about here >*

## **Results and discussion**

All the vocabulary and the direct quotations reported in this section are idiomatic translations from the original language, Mandarin.

In response to the request to explain what makes a brand a luxury brand, the young female respondents' answers majored on 'quality' and 'reputation'. This is consistent with the assertion by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) that superior quality is an essential component of luxury goods. A 'high price' was also a crucial element of the concept of a luxury brand and, even though these young women did not have a large amount of disposable income, they had several credit cards, which they used to fund their purchases. Other vocabulary used in their descriptions of a luxury fashion product included: 'superior', 'uniqueness', 'exclusiveness', 'successful', and 'wealthy'. Some responses referred specifically to the design dimension of the product: 'classic', 'elegant' and 'never out of fashion', the last of

those descriptions implying the longevity of the product and hence the justification of its high price.

In attempting to define the meaning of a luxury brand, one respondent made an explicit comparison with high street brands:

“I have been purchasing luxury branded goods since I was a teenager. After purchasing so many luxury branded products – accessories like handbags, shoes, ear rings, sunglasses and key rings – and some outfits, I now find it difficult to buy things from high-street-brand shops. Honestly, I’m not against buying products from them. Occasionally, I visit those shops to check out their seasonal offers. However, I rarely find anything attractive. Sometimes I ask myself what reason there is for me to change my purchasing behaviour or switch from high-street brands to high-end brands. I believe that luxury branded products have better quality, design and after-sales service. Although the initial payment for luxury branded products is higher than ordinary products, luxury products always last longer or add value in the long term”.

(Participant 16)

Respondents tended to be adamant that anyone paying the premium price of a luxury brand should receive exclusive service. Some elaborated on the personalised service they had encountered when purchasing luxury products, although for a few respondents there was some initial trepidation about entering the store:

“I felt great when I bought the product. The shopping experience made me feel different and important”. (Participant 23)

“The customer service was brilliant. I enjoyed being personally served by the sales person”. (Participant 17)

“I was anxious when I walked into the store. There were so many sales people offering to help me choose the product. I can’t remember the details until the sales person gave me a nicely packaged product, information about the warranty, and welcomed my next visit”. (Participant 9)

As well as the actual service in the store, respondents discussed the feeling of ‘happiness’ when visiting shopping malls with luxury brand outlets. This finding confirms the significance of the shopping environment for Asian consumers, summed up by the title of a retailing report by Interbrand: “Asia’s Temples of Luxury” (Blume and Chajet, 2009). This feature of the point of sale is an important ingredient of the positioning of a brand (Truong *et al.*, 2009), the opulent architecture often reflecting and reinforcing the European heritage of many of the luxury brands. In Taiwan, two malls in particularly prestigious locations are the main draw for both domestic and tourist shoppers. The first opened in 2003, while the relative newcomer, arriving in 2009, is a European-styled mall in which Bulgari is the flagship store. A third mall was opened in 2010, not in the capital Taipei, but in a complex of luxury hotels, theme park and exclusive residences in the so-called ‘Cannes of Asia’, aiming to offer an all-encompassing holiday destination to Chinese and Western tourists (Lo, 2010). Respondents remarked that they would often visit such malls with their friends, seeking the hedonistic experience created by the environment.

### ***Purchasing motivations***

During the previous year, respondents had purchased luxury fashion both at ‘entry level’ (for example, small accessories) and at a higher level of financial commitment (shoes,

handbags and clothing). Whereas Dubois and Czellar (2002) found ‘self-indulgence’ to be the major motivation in luxury shopping, the results of the present study suggest that ‘a sense of being important’ is the most common motivator. The prominence of a luxury brand, in terms of highly visible brand identification symbols, is a significant concern for young female Taiwanese. They ‘examine’ the outfits worn by their peers, so dressing in luxury brands is aimed at making a good impression and ‘establishing social connections at work’. Having ‘made it’ or being seen to have done so, appears to be crucial. The explanation of such a motivation may be cultural, based on the concept of ‘face’ that is prevalent in Asian cultures, or it may be that these young women are insecure in their own identity and need ‘props’ to establish their credibility. Such indicators must, however, be recognisable to others:

“For me, it’s important that many people know about the brands. I definitely do not want to spend a fortune on something people have not heard of or do not appreciate the value of”. (Participant 21)

While it is important that others should recognise the purchased brand as being ‘luxury’, respondents furthermore wanted to be the only one in their circle of friends, or at least the first, to actually own it. The motivation is thus not to express individuality, but rather to heighten social status. Participant 3 explained that “I feel good when there is no one carrying or using the same luxury product as I am”. That feel-good factor extended to being seen carrying a store-brand carrier bag, even when it contained nothing more than an ‘entry’ level product. Other respondents alluded to ‘showing off’ or ‘impressing others’ as their reason for being an innovator in luxury fashion. For example:

“I love the attention when I show off my latest purchase. Some people will ask me a lot of questions and compliment me for owning the product. For instance: ‘Where did you get this? How can I get hold of it?’ or ‘What a great product; I’d like to have one’”. (Participant 15)

“I enjoy being the centre of attention. People in my [social] group want to borrow the product and check it over”. (Participant 12)

Many luxury brands have heeded the valid generalisation that the scarcity value is an important attraction for luxury brands (Park, Robolt and Jeon, 2008) and offer limited editions by means of seasonal or annual ‘collections’. Many of the respondents sought this exclusivity by ensuring that they were fully informed of future collections. These products were perceived as collectables or investments and possessing them elevated the status of their owners among their friends. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of Blume and Chajet (2009) that the hierarchy of needs differs between the East and the West. They assert that status seeking is the major motivator for Asian consumers of luxury, whereas Westerners tend to purchase brands for more personal reasons, such as to help them feel better about themselves. Some of our own respondents thought that young Asian women are confronted with a very competitive social environment and that luxury fashion purchasing could manifest their ideal social standing.

“In Asia, young women can be very competitive. When they are young, they are comparing things like their family backgrounds, their parents’ jobs, and which school they are attending. When they get older, they will compare their job title, their husband or partner’s job title or income level, their lifestyle, and their children’s

future: for example, which, school they are attending, and which subjects they are majoring in”. (Participant 3)

### ***Influences on purchasing***

Given such a competitive social environment, it was not surprising to find that, confirming the findings of Wong and Ahuvia (1998) with respect to Asian consumers, reference groups were an extremely important influence on the purchase behaviour of the participants in our study. Both the external influence of celebrities and the internal influence of friends and family had a marked impact on their decisions. Two celebrity sisters, in particular, were consistently mentioned, whose television shows routinely advised viewers about the latest trends in luxury fashion. Although respondents treated them as knowledgeable sources, they regarded journalists as having an equal if not more important role in the dissemination of information about luxury brands:

“Many celebrities own these brands. The journalists and reporters often criticise or comment about the outfits they’re wearing and brands they’re using”. (Participant 7)

“The luxury brand must be rated by a well-known magazine or highly recommend by social icons or celebrities”. (Participant 22)

“I love to follow fashion trends. Magazines and newspapers provide me with the information I need when I face purchasing decisions”. (Participant 2)

For many young Taiwanese women, shopping is the main leisure activity. They take fashion seriously, by reading fashion magazines in order to be sure that their frequent purchases will maintain ‘face’ (Quartly, 2006). Those are also an important reference point

for the latest trends from Western markets (Walker, 2009). This group of consumers furthermore devote considerable time to participation in online fashion forums.

Reflecting the findings of a study of young Koreans (Park, Rabolt and Jeon, 2008), that conforming to the behaviour of significant others was important when deciding on luxury purchases, all respondents emphasised the role that knowledgeable friends and family play in the provision of relevant information. For example:

“I would say my friends influenced me a lot on the choice of this product. Many of my girlfriends love to shop or go window-shopping at these luxury branded stores. They often compare the products and prices from different luxury branded retailers”.  
(Participant 1)

“My mother and family members like aunts, sisters, or sisters-in-law influence me most. I always love the products they own. I admire their taste and style. To make myself feel good or to earn their approval, I would try to buy something from luxury brand retailers to impress them”. (Participant 13)

“Many of my friends often ask me for fashion or shopping advice because they often find my personal taste is unique and different from other people’s. That’s the reason I love luxury products more than anything”. (Participant 8)

The variety of ways in which information was gathered and disseminated within this group of women suggests they might score high on the involvement scale proposed by Tigert, Ring and King (1976), even if they don’t fulfil the criteria for ‘heavy purchasers’. That scale was developed in the context of fashion in general rather than luxury fashion specifically, so evidence of activities demonstrating considerable involvement in the luxury fashion market may be prevented from qualifying as heavy purchasing by the attendant cost implications.

The costly purchases made by the young women in our sample appeared to result in undue cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). A previous study published by the consultancy firm Synovate (2009) identified a feeling of guilt experienced by many female buyers of luxury products, varying from the highest proportions of 66% and 58% respectively in the UK and USA to the lowest of 26% in India. Although our Taiwanese respondents admitted to using credit cards to fund their luxury purchases, they tended to expend considerable time and effort before doing so. Participant 15 nevertheless confessed, “Probably, I shouldn’t buy the product – I should pay a smaller amount of money for a lesser brand instead of paying a premium for one bag or one pair of shoes”. For most respondents, the security of a genuine quality product that can continue to be used for a long time outweighs any guilt in spending large sums on luxury fashion:

“I consider my money is well spent. The luxury product is worth every penny I have spent. Although some people argue about what cheaper products I could get, those don’t provide the product quality and customer service that luxury brands do. I don’t like to keep changing or buying replacements either quarterly or annually. These luxury products often last for a long time”. (Participant 18)

“I think the value is worth a lot more than a brand badge. Because of its ‘signature look’, the product can be viewed as a classic or vintage piece in the future” (Participant 4).

After reviewing the existing literatures, this study discovered the majority of reports and papers are using the findings from China to represent and generalise consumers in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Hence, the results showed that each district has very different cultural influence and social impact due to its surrounding and background. The results confirmed that while both Taiwanese and Chinese consumers are sharing identical



enthusiasm towards luxury consumptions and luxury brands, but behaved rather differently in several aspects, such as motivations and consumption behaviours. Prior studies have investigated the luxury consumption in the Asia as a whole and generalised their findings, since they posit that the region is heavily influenced by Confucian beliefs (Ardichvili, Jondle and Kowske, 2009; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). However, there is evidence to show that these districts (Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) each have developed a unique subset of Confucianism, and thus, marketing practices in these districts are not same (Chung *et al.*, 2008).

## **Conclusions**

### ***Theoretical contributions***

This article contributes to the limited literature on luxury purchasing in the Asian context with several contributions: Firstly, the study it reports is was the first to research the factors that contribute to the buying of luxury fashion products by young female Asian consumers. Our findings, first of all, suggest that, as a specific case in point, the members of the ‘Strawberry Generation’ in Taiwan are motivated by what others think about them and expect them to do, rather than by ‘themselves’ as is more usual in individualistic Western cultures. Given that this increasingly affluent group of educated young Taiwanese women is an important target market segment, the knowledge that their prime motivation in shopping for luxury goods will be a quest for status provides a sound foundation for custom-targeted marketing communication strategies. As Phau and Prendergast (2000) have warned, however, marketers should be wary of employing standardised promotional strategies transferred from the Western context because those themes may not properly reflect the prime motivators of Asian consumer behaviour.

Secondly, our findings show that young women in Taiwan tend to be heavily involved with luxury fashion brands, and revel in the entire pre-purchase and purchase processes. Other studies have also found these externally influenced motivators of Asian luxury consumption, albeit not among the younger age group. In combination with the first finding that these consumers are not internally motivated by their selves, evidence of their innate enjoyment in the pursuit of status via ownership of luxury products signals a shift from collectivism to individualism their shopping behaviour and thereby contributes significantly to the body of knowledge about the buying of luxury brands. Further studies could usefully investigate whether or not such involvement and enjoyment are common among young women generally, in the East and the West.

Thirdly, Jin (2011) asserts that younger Asians constitute a sizeable segment of luxury goods market. We have found that Taiwan is no exception, with its young women typically indulging in the buying of luxuries and undertaking considerable research to be the first to own the 'right' luxury fashion item. Their intensive fact-finding involves the reading of fashion magazines and taking note of celebrities' wardrobes, to be in tune with the latest trends, but they also draw upon input from an older generation, copying their taste when it is judged to be elegant. This results in two quite disparate luxury-purchasing styles: 'in-vogue' versus 'classic'.

Finally, the young women in our sample appeared to enjoy the whole process of reading up on the latest trends, visiting a store in which they were treated as special, and finally showing off their luxury fashion. There was little evidence of any guilt about spending large sums of money on luxury brands. The cost of the product not only provided our respondents with a tangible fashion item, probably long-lasting, but also elevated their social status, a factor of significant importance that far outweighed the price. In practice, sales managers should be able to make use of this knowledge in planning a selling strategy.

Emphasis on the intangible benefits, especially the enhanced status, could be a persuasive argument to win these young Taiwanese consumers as customers. Furthermore, their appreciation of the whole retail experience suggests that brand managers might focus their efforts on the provision of excellent service, acknowledging not only the existing but also the potential future value of this market segment.

## **Managerial implications**

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study provide important implications for luxury retailers in terms of a better understanding of young female consumer's purchasing behaviour. Different studies of consumer behaviour and luxury markets have emphasis on different perspectives. These perspectives have been advanced in the literature to offer somewhat differing views on consumer purchasing behaviour and motivations regarding luxury consumption. In recent years, there has been increased attention paid to the luxury shopper in Far East region, especially Greater China (including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau). One particular luxury market, Taiwan market, has risen swiftly while many luxury goods conglomerates have intended to partake this raising market after many events successfully achieved in the Chinese luxury market.

Results have underlined two vital managerial implications: Firstly, gaining more specific segment and consumers' attention in the competitive market is playing a vital role in the luxury industry. Secondly, creating positive brand image and developing public relation have become the most effective way to communicate with both existing and potential customers. The effect of celebrity endorsement has played an essential role to generate consumer's interests. Therefore, marketers should utilise celebrity endorsement to create publicity and develop popularity has become a trend in the luxury industry.

Moreover, in the luxury sector, consumer profiling is an important factor for luxury retailers to define their targeted consumers in terms of fashion leaders or followers. Fashion leaders are tended to be the first to get hold of the product which exclusivity, uniqueness and feeling different are what they are trying to pursue when they make the luxury purchases. For fashion followers, they are intended to make sure their chosen luxury products have been approved by others (e.g., friends or families). Therefore, marketers must first target both influencers and opinion leaders in order to achieve maximum results.

Finally, social media has been playing as a strategic role in marketplace, especially for luxury industry. Many luxury retailers have intended to apply interactive website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube to generate the public interests. Employing new technology with mobile application is creating another communication channel between luxury retailers and consumers. Luxury retailers will have opportunity to observe consumers' behaviour and identify the demands of consumers while consumers are sharing their opinions with other consumers.

### ***Limitations and directions for future research***

Hung (2006) has suggested that the fashion market in Taiwan is similar to that in mainland China. If that is correct, the findings of our study are potentially generalisable to the much larger Chinese market. It should be noted, however, that the findings from this exploratory qualitative study are limited by the small size of the sample: 23 participants. Further investigations of this age group are recommended, perhaps taking a quantitative approach, and comparing the 'soft' Strawberry Generation with the hard-working previous generation, to assess whether there are significant differences between the two in their luxury purchasing behaviour. It is intuitively reasonable to think that, while the young females in our

study have an all-consuming interest in luxury, their older counterparts will be less involved. In particular, they may be expected to devote considerably less effort to pre-purchase information gathering and may thus demand a distinctive communication strategy.

We encourage more research in this interesting area and segment, and believe there are numerous questions that are suitable for further exploration. First, questions about how the strawberry segment behaves in other cultural settings, contexts, purchase situations, and other more developed countries remain unknown. Second, in relation to the key constructs presented in Table 1, future research should consider whether the constructs can be better defined and conceptualised. Finally, a proposed conceptual model should be developed, refined and tested quantitatively in order to understand both the antecedents and consequences of luxury consumption among this particular segment.

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**Table 1: Key definitions and conceptualisations**

<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Key Author(s)</b>
Luxury purchasing motives is defined as "the motivations and influential factors that may persuade consumers' purchase intentions."	Husic and Cacic, 2009; Wu, 2014
Luxury purchase environment is defined as "a comfortable, exclusive and luxurious purchasing environment, which allows consumers to enjoy their time while making luxury purchases."	Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998.
Luxury buying behaviour is defined as "consumer's purchasing decision making process with luxury branded goods which may different from their daily consumptions."	Prendergast and Wong, 2003; Wiedmann et al., 2009
Young female shoppers are defined as "younger consumers aged between 18-32 years old."	Wu, 2014
<b>Key Studies and their Focus</b>	
Seeking happiness via consumption as a major organizing norm for society first emerged in the West.	Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988.
Consumer societies either have developed or are developing in a vast number of cultures around the world.	Belk, 1988.
The construction and measurement issues of luxury brands.	Luxury Institute, 2005; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999
The progress of mass market of luxury goods.	Nueno & Quelch, 1998; Vickers & Renand, 2003.
Consumer behaviour due to status consumption.	Eastman et al., 1999, Eastman et al., 1997; Nueno & Quelch, 1998.
Conspicuous consumption in a contemporary environment.	Mason, 2001; Shipman, 2004; Trigg, 2001.

**Table 2: Characteristics of participants**

Participant number	Age	Monthly income £	Education Level	Current Occupation
1	19	Family support: £250	University: undergraduate	Undergraduate student
2	24	£800	University: undergraduate	Assistant accountant
3	31	£1100	University: postgraduate	Marketing director
4	22	£600	University: undergraduate	Salesperson
5	25	£850	University: undergraduate	Travel agent
6	20	Family support: £250	University- Undergraduate	Undergraduate student
7	32	£1250	University: postgraduate	Accountant
8	29	£1700	University: postgraduate	Commercial lawyer
9	23	£500	University: undergraduate	Secretary
10	19	Family support: £200	University: undergraduate	Undergraduate student
11	18	Family support: £450	Senior high school	Senior high school student
12	31	£1100	University: undergraduate	English teacher
13	26	Family Support: £400	University: undergraduate	Postgraduate student
14	24	£700/Monthly	University: undergraduate	Assistant website designer
15	23	£600	College	Supermarket cashier
16	30	£1900	University- Undergraduate	Self-employed manager of trading company
17	32	£1300	University: postgraduate	Financial advisor
18	26	Allowance: £750	University: undergraduate	Housewife
19	23	£700	University: undergraduate	University administrative staff
20	20	Family support: £400	University: undergraduate	Undergraduate student
21	27	£1300	University: postgraduate	Advertising director
22	27	£1500	University: postgraduate	Wedding planner
23	25	Allowance: £550	University: postgraduate	Housewife

**Note:** At the time of writing, £1.00 (GBP) = €1.23 (EUR) and \$1.61 (USD)

## Appendix A – Full Questionnaire

1. What brands would you say are 'luxury brand'? Why?
2. How would you define a luxury brand?
3. Would you consider a restaurant such as highly Michelin rated restaurant (e.g., Fat Duck, Waterside Inn? Rhodes 24) A luxury product/service? Why or Why not? Would what you wear to the restaurant be just or more important than the dinner?
4. Why do you think young women buy luxury products?
  - (a) Have you ever bought a luxury product? What was it?
  - (b) Why did you buy this luxury product?
5. Thinking back to your last luxury product purchase, what feelings did you have when you bought the product? And afterwards when you used the product?
6. Did you feel you had somehow 'made-it' by buying this product?
7. Did you feel you had made a good choice because of the superior design?
8. Did you feel it fulfilled a function? What function?
9. Did the product make you stand out from others?
10. Did anyone influence you to buy this product? Who and why?
11. Did you buy the product to be the first in your group to buy it? Why?
12. Did you feel you got value for money with this product? Why?
13. Is buying a limited edition of a luxury product important to you? Why?
14. Is buying a luxury product creating an image you want to give others? Why?
15. Have you noticed any differences between Asian and Western young women in terms of their buying and using luxury products? What are these differences? Why might there be differences?